

## Whatever Became of Yankee Jem? A fragment

David Ward

On September 5, 1831, Stephen Reynolds, an observant American merchant who had lived in Honolulu since 1822, noted in his Journal:

Fine morn. At half past two James Wood called to go to Fort to get soldiers to take KELA, the noted thief to Fort, who had been stealing. Ship, Columbus, Osborn, 2,000 bbls oil. Yankee Jem was taken and put in Fort. Capt. Cole & I called on Gov. who said it was King's orders. He did not know for why.

On the following day, Reynolds wrote:

Fine morn. Ivanhoe came in. Capt. Cole & I went up to see King about Yankee Jem. King said he put him in the Fort to keep him until an opportunity offered to send him off the Islands!! . . .

On Sept. 25, 1831:

Fine morn. Capt. Snow's Second Officer was taken and put in the Fort. He was getting off water. Steward of the Ivanhoe was carrying some pies to Mr. Pitman, and some wine for Mr. Perkins. The Kanakas took it away from the Chinaman. Mr. Jones went to the Fort, took the Second Officer out.<sup>1</sup>

On Sept. 26, 1831:

. . . Messrs James & Cavanagh went into the Fort & told Gov. Adams to let James Vowels out of irons, or put them in. Gov. said he would put them in. Mr. James presented himself and told him to begin if he dared, and ordered Vowels to be let out, which was immediately done!!!! . . .

James Vowels, a British subject, was also known as Yankee Jem, or Yankee Jim. The record is silent as to why King Kamehameha III had ordered Vowels imprisoned and banished from the kingdom, but it is

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clear that Yankee Jem's difficulties with the government did not end with his release from the Fort in 1831.

A few months earlier, on April 1, 1831, the 18-year-old King Kaiikeaouli had turned over the government of Oahu to the formidably devout Kaahumanu, widow of Kamehameha I and *kuhina nui*, regent of the kingdom since 1819, who promptly appointed her brother, Kuakini, also known as John Adams, to the governorship of Oahu.

The 390-pound Kuakini then "declared his purpose to restrain crimes and immoralities, such as had been specified in the edict of 1829, but had not been well enforced, including Sabbath-breaking, gambling, and the traffic in ardent spirits."<sup>2</sup>

The non-missionary foreign residents, particularly Reynolds, William French and the British Consul, Richard Charlton, defied efforts by the native police to put an end to their billiards, bowling, dancing, drinking, Sunday horseback riding and general hell-raising, with such determination that Hiram Bingham, leader of the American missionaries and spiritual counsel to Kaahumanu, came to believe that his very life was in danger.<sup>3</sup>

Eight years later, in a document entitled "Solemn protest of James Vowles (sic) against the King, Chiefs and Government of the Sandwich Islands," Vowles declared:

I James Vowles do most solemnly protest before Richard Charlton, H.B.M. Consul for this archipelago, against the King, chiefs, and government of the Sandwich Islands, for unlawful imprisonment, and imposing an extortionate fine of \$600 on me, in the month of March 1834, for an alleged crime, and for which there was no positive proof evidence brought against me! And I do most solemnly protest before said Richard (sic) Charlton, H.B.M. Consul, against the said King, Chiefs, and Government of the Sandwich Islands, for the unlawful seizure, and detention of my property, and effects, in the month of January 1834 previous to the imposition of said unlawful imprisonment and fine of \$600, to wit half of a certain public house, situated in the village of Honolulu in the Island of Oahu together with the entire of the effects, that is to say all the furnishing utensils of said public house, and also the detention of a certain straw dwelling house, situated in the said village of Honolulu.

I am bound to make this solemn protest against the said King, Chiefs, and Government of the Sandwich Islands in consequence of a continued series of unjust and oppressive measures which they have taken against me in the year 1834 and continued until the present date.<sup>4</sup>

Vowles' temerity in submitting his petition for the redress of his grievances against the Hawaiian government may have been the result of a dramatic event that occurred on July 9, 1839, described in a letter from Reynolds to his friend Natha Spear at "St. Francisco or Monterey":<sup>5</sup>

Bingham & his tribe are nominally dead, dead, dead! The French Frigate Le Artimese arrived the 9th ulto. Giving the Government forty eight hours to comply with his demands (see the Manifesto)<sup>6</sup> Big mouth Queen & Kuanoa<sup>7</sup> requested time to send for the King. It was granted. He arrived at the east end of the Island Saturday

evening (13th) 9 p.m., sent an express up to know how things were. Sunday morning he came in, in the N. York—Astor & True Blue in company. —

Big mouth & all the petty scoundrels here, were flying in all directions to get twenty thousand dollars ready for Deposit—Some they had, some they hired. Saturday (13th) no King. They signed the demands of the Manifesto, and carried the cash on board. Afterwards came the Treaty of Commerce. Brandy & Wine to be admitted for five per cent!! No French Subject to be tried unless the French Consul (Capt. Dudoit) grants leave, only by a jury of Foreigners. What else I have not heard, but it is said to be a good document.

So you see Bingham & tribe are boosted a peg (say five or six) lower. The King & his train went on board yesterday. Signed the Treaty of Commerce & Ratified the Manifesto.

Have we not gained a great & glorious Victory; enough for one time? . . .

It seems likely that Vowels' petition was granted and that he resumed operating a public house, for during another highly tense period in Hawaii's foreign relations, the brief British occupation of the islands in 1843, he submitted a request for a liquor license, in which he described himself as having "resided on the Sandwich Islands for the last Sixteen years and had during that time been engaged in Keeping a Public House, not having any other Occupation whereby to gain a living."<sup>8</sup>

A year or two later, Vowels addressed another document: "TO HIS MAJESTY KING KOUKOUOURIE," on the cover of which some functionary wrote "Palapala Paniolo Na King," meaning "Cowboy's letter to the King." Use of the term 'cowboy' is not clear.

In handwriting far more elegant than that of his earlier communications and probably, like the others, written for him, Vowels stated: (original spelling has been retained)

Having waited patiently a long time for the fulfillment of your promise to restore my horse and saddle, I am again subjected to the necessity of addressing you with a Petition, which I trust will have the desired effect. If I were situated as others on this Island, I would not have asked you for them, but to me my horse and saddle are the only means I have of getting a living, and had you not promised them to me, as you have done, more than once, I should not so earnestly have expected them, nor do I altogether think now that King Koukouourie will forfeit his word for so trifling a consideration.

If your intention had been to keep my property, why had you not verbally convinced me of that intention, when I personally addressed you on the subject, and I am very sorry, King, to think you should slight me so particularly at this time, after having treated you with all the respect due to you as King of these Islands. However, I will not form so hasty a conclusion of the matter, but still trust that those favors you were once wont to bestow upon Yankee Jem will not at this critical moment [be] so speedily withdrawn, nor will I think you Guilty (I may also say) of ingratitude to one who would in a case of emergency have given his life in your service. In My Country, King, Ingratitude and injustice are by all men considered unpardonable crimes. I mention ingratitude because I think my present case is considerably aggravated by it, however, I will endeavour to explain my meaning as explicitly as possible. If you wish to establish the laws of England and America in your Country, why do you not conform to them and distribute justice to white men and Canacas alike and not punish me for the same crime for which you let a Canaca escape.

I am alluding, King, to the Highway robbery and attempts to murder, Committed on the white men by Canacas, on their way to Kolau. I mention this not to upbraid you

but to endeavour to Convince you that others have a sence of feeling, as well as yourself, and to remind you, though forgiveness cannot be given at all times and in all Cases, justice should be distributed with an impartial hand.

I might say more on the subject, but I trust enough has been said already, to convince you of the great error you are labouring under, and I hope this will be the last time I shall have to address you on a subject so dissagreable and painfull to the feelings of your most humble and obedient servant. YANKEE JEM.

The petition bears the following notation in the handwriting of Robert Crichton Wyllie, minister for foreign relations since 1845:

Yankee Jem alias James Vowles to Kamehameha III (and presumed to be) R.C.W. Demanding the restitution of a Horse & Saddle. Most impudent letter.

Whether or not Vowles recovered his horse and saddle is not known, for apparently there are no later references to him as a resident of Hawaii.

In the gold country of California, however, near Auburn in Placer County, there is a ghost town called Yankee Jim's, "named for a notorious character who possibly came to the Sacramento valley before the gold discovery."<sup>10</sup>

As one authority stated:

The origin of the name, Yankee Jim's, is one of those riddles often encountered by the student of the heterogeneous nomenclature of the mining regions. Some hold that the individual from whom the camp derived its title was, indeed, a Yankee. The majority, however, believe that he was "a son of the Emerald Isle" who, because of his luck in striking rich diggings (popularly attributed to shrewdness), had become known as "Yankee Jim."

Be that as it may, Yankee Jim (who seems to have been somewhat given to banditry) was the first to mine away from the river bars of the North Fork (of the American River), and to find the rich diggings along the ridges. He sought to keep these discoveries of his a secret, but rumors spread quickly, and by 1850 miners swarmed over the entire ridge country. At the place of Yankee Jim's chief activities a town sprang up, was named for him, and became famous as a rich mining center.<sup>11</sup>

A clergyman writing in 1853 described Yankee Jim's "as a rather wild early camp."<sup>12</sup>

Another source, writing in a philatelic periodical, said:

No one, least among them historians, agrees about just what brand of skulduggery Jim was perfecting. Some say he was a jolly good fellow with an undeserved rotten reputation.

Those who hold with the horse-thief theory believe Jim hid his pilfered steeds in a corral in the area. As to 'Jim, the claim-jumper,' it can only be said that anyone who was described as a 'bad man' in those times was usually attributed with at least one stolen site.

It is possible that Yankee Jim was a slandered man, but in making such a claim it is more likely that a moralist is house-cleaning history.

The arguments about Yankee Jim do not end with his occupation. There is also a dusty debate about his origins.

Depending on which book one is reading, he either came from Australia, Ireland, or England. None of these guesses seems plausible if the 49er's fussiness about knowing a man's birthplace is taken into account.

In the camps, a man from Holland was called Dutch Harry, a man from France was always called Frenchy and a man from Boston was, logically, Boston Ben. The term 'Yankee' was reserved for Americans whose homes were north of the Ohio River and east of the Mississippi River. Either Jim was a Yankee or the term was used as a joke by his friends or victims.

The uncertainty does not stop there either. If the previous questions are ever resolved, researchers can begin figuring out Jim's true last name. Some say it was Robinson, others swear it was Goodland.

Modern postal historians are forced to accept a general description of the man—he was a crook with a British accent.

However, if a collector is exhibiting a cover from Yankee Jim's and looking for an eye-catching write-up, he should throw out all the boring controversy to say Yankee Jim was a horse-thief who was hung in 1852. This theory appears in one of the histories of Placer Country.<sup>13</sup>

While hardly conclusive, the available evidence appears to indicate that James Vowels, a British subject, some time public house keeper and cowboy in Hawaii, might very well have been the Yankee Jim who struck it rich in the Gold Rush, only to come to the end of his rope, literally, in 1852.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Respectively; Pitman and Perkins were trader/businessmen in Honolulu, Jones was U. S. Commercial agent.

<sup>2</sup> Bingham, Hiram, *Residence of Twenty-One Years in the Sandwich Islands*, Hartford, 1847.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> HSA, FO & Ex, Nov. 1, 1839.

<sup>5</sup> Letter, Reynolds to Nathan Spear, July 18, 1839, in California Historical Society, San Francisco.

<sup>6</sup> Captain C. P. T. Laplace, commanding the frigate L'Artemise demanded that the Hawaiian Government grant religious freedom to native as well as foreign Catholics, with a \$20,000 bond to ensure compliance, and a salute for the French flag. Reynolds assisted in raising the necessary \$20,000.

<sup>7</sup> "Big Mouth Queen" was Reynolds' term for Kekauluohi, who had been wife of Kamehameha I, later wife of Kamehameha II, and subsequently the wife of Charles Kana'ina, by whom she had Lunalilo, who became king in 1873. She had become *kuhina nui* upon the death of Kinau in April 1839. Kuanoa was Kekuanaoa, governor of Oahu.

<sup>8</sup> HSA, FO & Ex, British Commission Docs. 1843.

<sup>9</sup> HSA, FO & Ex, 1839.

<sup>10</sup> Anonymous, "Some facts concerning Leland Stanford" California Historical Society Quarterly, 2: 204.

<sup>11</sup> Hoover, Rensch & Rensch, *Historical Spots in California*, Stanford University Press, 1938, p. 134-135.

<sup>12</sup> Benton, J. A., *California Pilgrimage*, Sacramento, 1853, cited in California Historical Society Quarterly, 2: 204, op. cit.

<sup>13</sup> Mitchell, Gretchen Heather, "Yankee Jim—crook and founding father," in *Stamp Collector*, Nov. 4, 1978, Albany, Oregon, p. 28-29.